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# NATIVE COUNSELLING SERVICES OF ALBERTA

## SUBMISSION

to the

## PROVINCIAL COMMITTEE

on

## TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

NCSA
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February 1984

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INTRODUCTION:

Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA) is a non-profit, non-political, Native-run organization which has been involved in the social services field since 1974. At that time, NCSA began the Family and Juvenile Courtworker Program which now employs 34 courtworkers located throughout the province and provides a wide variety of services, inside and outside of court, for its adult and juvenile clients.

These services include: help in getting legal counsel, personal counselling, referrals to other agencies, explanations and information about legal procedures and terminology, juvenile probation supervision, recruiting foster homes, community education work and providing liaison services between Native families and other organizations (such as social services and schools).

Support programs for the Family Courtworker Program include parenting skills programs such as the Family Life Improvement Programs, and a crisis intervention/family support program in Edmonton called the Homemaker's Program. (For more information on NCSA's other programs and services, as well as history, philosophy, funding and organization, see the Annual Report included as Appendix A).

Of all NCSA's programs, the Family and Juvenile Courtworker Program is most closely involved with the school system. Family and Juvenile Courtworkers provide schools with services such as the

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following: providing Law Awareness programs; providing assistance with truancy problems; acting as a resource to teachers and students on 1) Native culture and lifestyle, 2) the juvenile court system, and 3) the law in general; providing family counselling and information to the family about the importance of education; and assisting the school system in developing procedures and courses that are more appropriate for Native students.

As a result of this involvement with Native families and the school system, NCSA has a number of suggestions and recommendations to make to the Committee that fall within the guidelines of: 1) "positive and negative experiences", 2) "deficiencies that currently exist in the educational system, curriculum, classroom or any related area", and 3) new iniatives including policies, procedures or programs".

It should be noted that in this report NCSA is looking at problems in the school system. Little or no reference is made to the praiseworthy efforts of government and community programs that are currently in place and doing well.

This brief is divided into three sections:

1. What are the problems?
2. Why are these problems occurring?
3. What can be done?

## I. WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS?

While there are many specific problems that Native children have in the school system, the two all encompassing ones are:

a) the dropout rate for Native children is extremely high, and

b) Native children are often unhappy and underachievers in school.

Both of these problems contribute to the difficulties that Native people face later in the labour market: lack of education, lack of qualifications, and lack of job experience. These are directly related to the high rate of Native unemployment.

A. The Drop Out Rate:

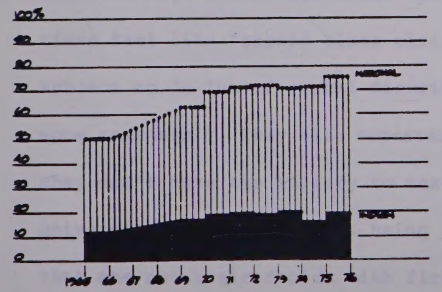
According to DIAND (1980: 49, Indian Conditions: A Survey), less than 20% of all Treaty Indian children complete grade 12. (see graph 1). This is a drop out rate of over 80%. In addition, the number of Treaty Indian children aged 14 to 18 attending school, is actually decreasing, despite a generally high birth rate in the Native population. (see graph 2).

NCSA corroborated this data with information gathered from its own staff.

GRAPH 1

**RETENTION:**

% Students Remaining to Grade 12 from Grade 2, Ten Years Earlier




sources:

(1) *Education in Canada*, Cat. no. 81-229, Statistics Canada

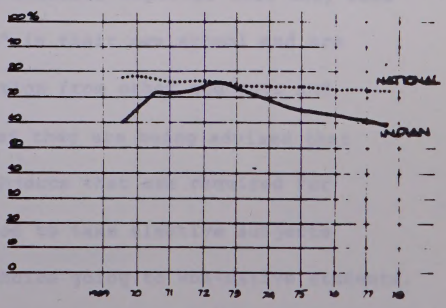
(2) Re-calculation of Table E-1, E-11 in "Socio-Economic Forecasts for Registered Indians in Canada 1976-77 to 1989-90," by D.E. Stewart, P.R.E., DIAND, 1977

Successful school completion (retention) among Indian students has improved modestly in the last 15 years (particularly between 1965 and 1970), but the Indian rate remains less than one-quarter of the national rate.

GRAPH 2

**SECONDARY SCHOOL PARTICIPATION**

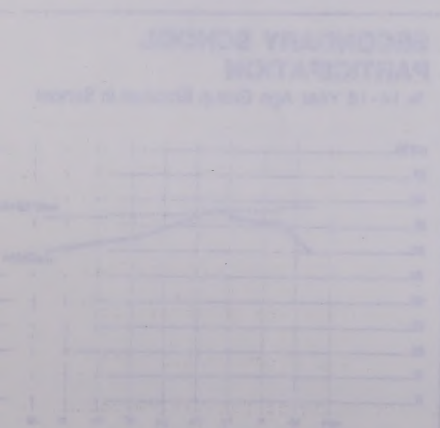
% 14-18 Year Age Group Enrolled in School

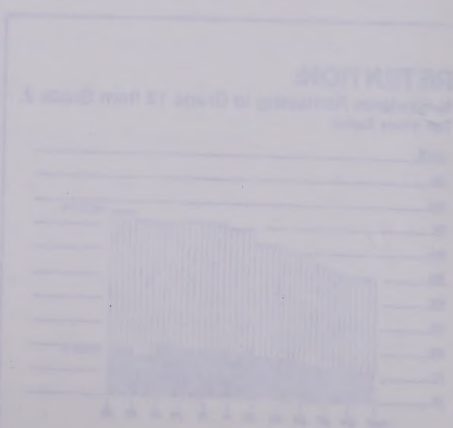



source:

Nominal Roll, Finance and Management Branch, DIAND, 1979.

While total secondary education enrolment has more than doubled since 1965, the proportion of children enrolled has been steadily declining since a peak in 1972-73.





Courtworkers reported that in some schools in Alberta for example,"not one Native student has graduated in 10 years" or "only two have graduated since the school opened". If further information is needed to confirm these reports it should be obtained by checking with the Department of Education.

B) Underachievement and Unhappiness in School

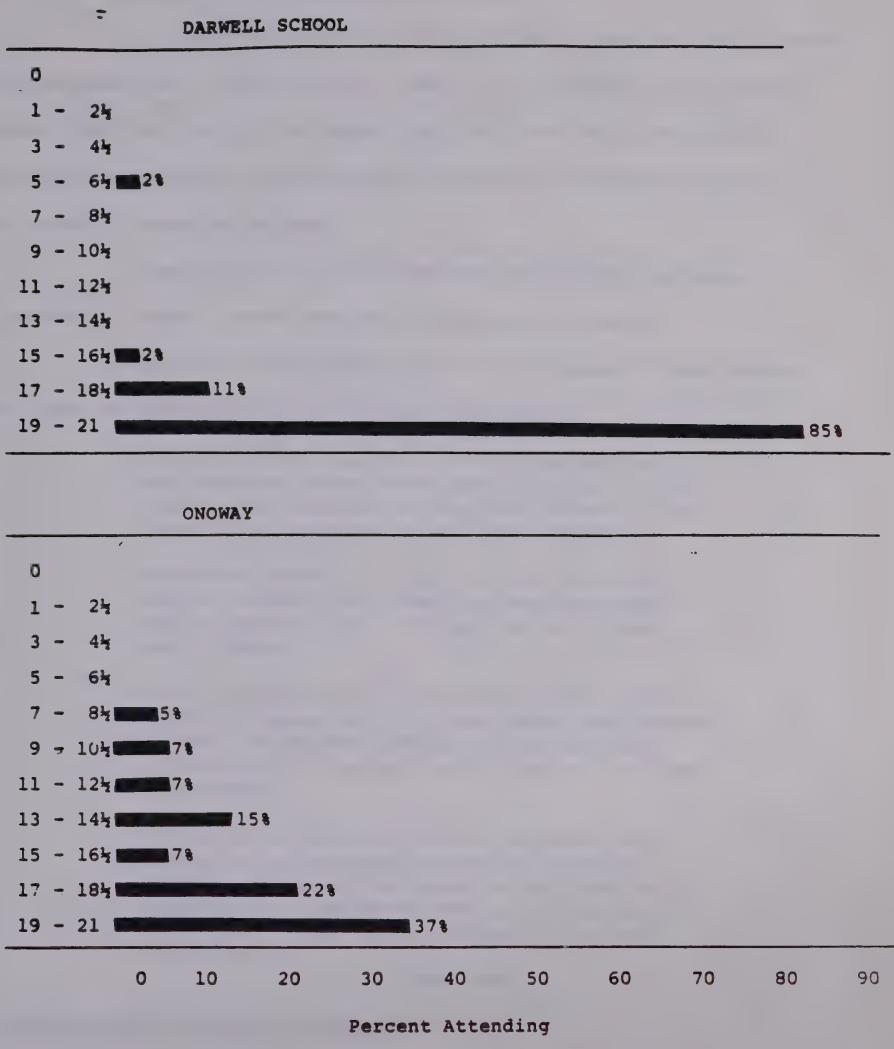
Underachievement and unhappiness in school are frequently linked. One of the signals of unhappiness in school is a high absentee rate.

NCSA staff report that many of the Native children they work with, who are still in school, are not happy and are not doing well. As one courtworker said "They're just biding their time 'til they're sixteen".

Graph 3 compares the absentee rates for one month for two different schools in the same region. Graph 3 illustrates these differences.

Both schools are junior high schools. Onoway also includes high school students. Onoway students reported that they sometimes feel like "second class citizens" in their own school and are subject to "a lot of verbal discrimination from other students and some teachers." They also reported that they are being advised that they don't have the ability to take subjects that are required for university entrance and are being forced to take elective subjects that are not their choice with first choice going to Non-Native students. It was also mentioned that some students are"being promoted to higher grades without completing the lower grade", this may lead to student frustration and apathy.

**Comparison of Native Students Attendance Rates in Two Schools, September 1983 (in percent) ***




*Total number of attendance days at Darwell School = 20½, total Native student population = 46.

Total number of attendance days at Onoway School = 21, total Native student population = 41.

Whether or not these situations are actually as serious as the students perceive, the school has a problem nevertheless.

In comparison, in the Darwell School there has been a recent change of staff with a new principal coming in. Students in the school reported that they really like school and that they feel like equals to the non-Native students. For example, they have no problems getting a good choice of elective subjects.

These are not the only factors that affect happiness or achievement in school; other factors are mentioned in part 2.

DIAND in Indian Conditions, lists a number of implications arising out of the current state of Native education:

> "Improved participation in elementary education may increase labour force participation in the future, but this may be more than offset by the decline in secondary school participation.
>
> Secondary schools, as well as vocational and skill training, are usually unavailable within Indian communities. This may reduce Indian participation.
>
> Lower participation in secondary schools, particularly among the 14-17 age group, may partially reflect the current inability of provincial schools to help Indian students adjust to a new environment.
>
> Increased Indian attendance at universities, community colleges and government training programs indicates increased Indian interest in education, and suggests that an inordinate proportion are being discouraged at the secondary level."
>
> (DIAND 1980: 57)

## II. WHY ARE THESE PROBLEMS OCCURRING?

Native children involved with the non-Native educational system face a number of difficulties that, in combination, make the probability of success in school very low:

a) poor self image
b) problems in the home
c) lack of knowledge about Native culture by school personnel
d) lack of quality in school curriculum materials
e) language difficulties
f) discrimination
g) "boarding" schools
h) inability to continue education in specialized field.

A) Poor self-image

Some Native children have what is usually called "an inferiority complex". They have been told by their family, by the media, and by the attitude of society as a whole, that they will "never amount to anything",.and also that they can expect to be discriminated against. Even if a Native child grows up with a good self image, once he or she enters the school system, it is quickly brought to their attention that they should not have a good self image, that they are"second class citizens". Another comment received was that the kids believe "we're Native, so we can't keep up".

It was also noted that in addition to the normal identity crises that children go through, Native children must deal with cultural identity problems and, sometimes, foster child identity problems.

B) Problems in the home

Problems in the home that may affect Native children's involvement in school are:

1. lack of good role models - parents and other family members may not have completed school or even entered school. In one community, for example, the first school was built 14 years ago. Before that, unless they were placed in residential schools, local Native people received no education at all. This makes it diffi-

cult to communicate the value of education to their children or to offer them the encouragement and assistance they need.

2. parents who have had unpleasant, unhappy and frustrating experiences in residential schools, may approach their own children's education with a negative attitude. They may feel they cannot demand that their children go through the same thing.

3. parents may have problems which cause stress for their children and a resulting lack of motivation in school. These problems could include: alcoholism, family violence, child neglect and abuse, an inability to cope with city life, unemployment, involvement in a criminal lifestyle and lack of parenting skills (especially in the area of discipline).

If these problems lead to the children being placed in a foster home, stress and insecurity may increase even more.

4. poverty may lead to Native children feeling alienated from other school children because they cannot join into sports activities, for example, that require expensive equipment, or they do not have lunches to bring to school. In addition their poverty may lead to ridicule from other students.

C) Lack of knowledge about Native culture by school personnel -

- Because school personnel, (teachers and other staff) receive little education about Native culture, lifestyle or issues, they cannot provide Native children with the knowledge, counselling and special understanding that they may need. They also cannot take into account the traditional Native teaching techniques which differ greatly from those employed by the non-Native system. (Traditional techni-

ques rely heavily on learning by doing, observation, cooperation and story-telling.)

This difference may lead to teachers and children having different expectations of what should be taught and how it should be taught.

An additional problem occurs when teachers avoid dealing with discrimination. By ignoring this kind of behaviour, they are missing an opportunity for positive action and education.

D) Lack of quality in school curriculum materials -

- Despite recent government actions to remove discriminatory material from school textbooks, the process is not complete. School library books should also be replaced. In addition, more books, and especially curriculum materials, are needed that deal with Native history, leaders, culture, religion, accomplishment and issues.

On some Native reserves, this problem is compounded by poor teachers, lack of funding, lack of course variety, poor school counsellors, and out of date teaching materials. Native students moving from reserve schools to urban schools sometimes find they are so far behind that they cannot catch up. Instead they get frustrated and quit.

There is also a problem with Native students being given culturally inappropriate psychological tests and on the basis of their scores, being assigned to vocational training or slow learner's classes.

E) Language difficulties -

- English is a second language for some Native children, especially in isolated, rural areas. Many of these children enter school with an inadequate knowledge of English, but receive little

or no special assistance so that they catch up. This was mentioned as a problem by courtworkers throughout the province.

F) Discrimination -

- Discrimination is schools seems to take two main forms:

1. active name calling and bullying by other children, and

2. stereotyping by school personnel.

1. The first form is self-explanatory. Some school personnel make assumptions about Native people based on hearsay, myths and the behaviour of the "visible minority" which is a small percentage of the Native population. Examples of these assumptions that courtworkers mentioned were:

a) Native children are not interested in sports - as a result they may not be asked to try out for teams.

b) Native parents will not visit schools - as a result they may not be invited to case conferences and decisions may be made about their children without their input.

c) Native parents are not interested in school - as a result, parents may not be notified of sporting events, field trips and other special events, even though their children are participating in them.

d) Native children are children with emotional problems or come from multi-problem families. This assumption is made because the children are quiet or shy or don't aggressively participate in groups -- as a result, they may be placed unnecessarily in special needs programs.

e) Native children can't do well in academic programs - as a result they are placed in vocational and service programs without any

choice. A particularly unpleasant example of this is worth mentioning: In one school, a courtworker reported, a Native student who was skilled in art and English was forced to take a typing program even though he had no fingers on one hand.

There were also some reports of outright verbal discrimination by some school personnel.

G) "Boarding" schools -

- In some school districts Native children must leave home to complete their education. In the Northlands district, this has become a problem because the children are billeted out in "foster homes", the majority of which are non-Native. There is no preparation time for the foster family or the child and no contact between the foster family and the natural family. As a result, the foster family and the child often have different expectations and little knowledge about each other. This can lead to frustration, alienation and feelings of futility for both the foster family and the student.

H) Inability to continue in specialized fields -

- There is very little funding available for Native students who are not eligible for scholarships, to continue their education after grade 12. Because many come from impoverished families, their families cannot assist.

## III. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Just as many of the problems are interrelated, so are these suggested solutions:

A) Poor self-image -

- The family is the key to this problem although there is also a role the school can play. Possible approaches are:

1. more work must be done with the parents and families. Parents should be encouraged to participate in parenting skills programs which cover a varity of topics including ways of developing a positive self-image in children, and discipline. An example is NCSA's Family Life Improvement Program. More family counselling and support services such as those provided by family courtworkers, are also needed.

2. more information on Native culture and heritage should be made part of the school curriculum. Cultural awareness programs for students and teachers such as the one recently developed by NCSA, should be implemented. Elders, media productions, and discussion groups are used, as well as exposure to cultural activities such as pow-wows and sweats.

3. special school counsellors should be hired 1) to provide support and encouragement 2) to provide counselling, and 3) to act as a liaison between the Native family and the school.

4. special workshops on self-image and self-esteem should be offered students.

5. teachers should be trained to recognize the special needs of Native children and to deal with them appropriately.

6. special groups should be set up so that one teacher is responsible for a"committee" of children that she advises, counsels and assists.

B). Problems in the home -

1. More involvement in providing services to families is needed. As mentioned in (A) above, family courtworkers, FLIP workers and other social service workers can act as liaison with the family and assist with counselling, referrals and learning parenting skills. They

can make referrals to alcoholism counsellors, job training programs, adult educational programs and so on. They can also discuss the importance of education with the parents and encourage them to get more closely involved with the school. They can "negotiate" between the parents and the school, for example, as one courtworker did in Grande Cache, when a family wanted their two sons (14 and 16) on the trapline. Through her work, it was finally agreed that the sons could do correspondence lessons while trapping instead of dropping out.

In some areas, schools have taken the initiative in providing these services, for example, the Sacred Circle program operated by Edmonton Public Schools. In other areas, such as Slave Lake, Peace River and Grande Cache, these services are provided to a limited extent by NCSA's Family and Juvenile Courtworkers.

2. Schools should make a greater attempt to move into the community and make the schools more accessible. Suggestions that NCSA staff made were: a) to hold Career Days in community centres and invite parents, b) to have a special community liaison person on staff.

C) <u>Lack of knowledge about Native culture by school personnel</u> -

The most desirable solution would be to employ more Native teachers, school counsellors, and so on. Otherwise, cultural awareness training should be mandatory for teachers during their University training. Seminars and workshops should also be made available to them on the job. Training could consist of units on topics such as Native socialization and teaching techniques, Native history, social organization, religion, issues and problems, and

accomplishments. A similar program is being developed by NCSA for use by social workers, correctional officers, and educational institutions.

School personnel should also use community resources such as Native courtworkers, friendship centre workers and Native social service workers to get information on Native culture. Many of these people are willing to get further involved with schools if requested to do so, and if manpower resources permit.

D) Quality of school curriculum materials -

- It should be mentioned that some schools are already working diligently to improve the quality of the Native content in their course material. More effort is still needed, however.

1. Textbooks should have accurate information on Native people, history, culture, contributions to society and relationships with White society.

Library books and school texts should be checked for biases in wording, inaccuracies in reporting and so on, a process which the Department of Education has recently begun. An interesting example, one courtworker brought up was that Little Big Horn is called a "massacre" in books, yet an attack by Custer, in which he killed hundreds of Native women and children in an undefended village, is usually referred to in books as a "battle".

2. School teaching materials should be diversified to include films and video presentations, such as NCSA's "Ways of My Ancestors" and The film "Trials of Jennie Morin"

3. Elders could be invited to speak and Native professionals could hold discussion groups on Natives and the law, cultural identity, self-esteem, alcoholism, and so on.

4. More Native input is needed in the school curriculum. A means of doing this would be to have more Native people involved in parent and teacher associations, on school committees, on the school board. This approach was tried by Education North in Slave Lake, and although this program did not succeed completely, more parents did become involved. They not only learned the value of education, but assisted the school in developing better course materials.

In Fort Macleod, for example, about 25% of the student population is Native, yet there are not Native people on the PTA executive.

5. Culturally fair psychological assessment tools should be developed so that children are placed appropriately into for example, vocational programs or learning disability programs.

6. The children themselves are a resource on Native culture. They should be encouraged to talk about and demonstrate aspects of their culture (e.g. traditional dress, dancing).

7. For reserve schools, additional funding is needed to upgrade, not only course materials, but the quality of teachers. Reserve school materials should be upgraded to the point that children transferring to urban schools are not seriously behind in their studies. A wider range of courses, e.g. vocational training, is also needed.

8. New approaches should be investigated and tried out, such as the Kipohtakaw Education Program currently operating on the Alexander Reserve.

E) Language difficulties -

- Special assistance should be made available to Native students with an incomplete knowledge of English. This could take the form of special language classes or English tutors.

F) Discrimination -

1. Discrimination should not be ignored by schools, whether it comes from the children or school personnel. Open discussion is a means of education and prevention of further occurrences. In the younger grades particularly, children may not understand what they are saying or the repercussions of their actions.

2. Student exchanges between Native and non-Native schools should also be tried. This program has been very successful with French and English schools.

3. Teachers who show discriminatory behaviour should be required to take part in cultural awareness education and if this is not successful, should be removed from their positions.

G) "Boarding" schools -

1. There should be preparation time before the students enter school. Natural parents and foster parents should have an opportunity to meet and exchange information, such as: phone numbers, number of brothers and sisters, whether or not the student will have pocket money, allergies, illnesses, habits, handicaps, knowledge of urban life.

Communication between parents and child, and between natural parents and foster parents, should continue on a regular basis through out the school year.

2. Support groups for the children and for the foster parents should be set up. A support group will give the students a chance to develop friendships to speak their own language, and to

have a group with which to discuss common problems.

- A support group for the foster parents will give them an opportunity to share information and concerns, and get assistance in handling problems.

H) Inability to continue -

- more funding is needed to assist Native students from impoverished families to continue in specialized fields. Special student loans, grants, and scholarships should be set up.

## CONCLUSION

In order to increase not only the number of Native children who finish school, but the number who get the full benefit of an education, a number of changes will have to occur. NCSA recommends the following approaches:

1. More work should be done with Native families, including counselling, referrals, and involvement in parenting skills programs.

2. More information on Native culture, history, leaders, religion, accomplishments, and so on should be integrated as part of the school curriculum. Methods of presentation could include better text and library books (see recommendation #8), workshops, video and film presentations, and increased Native content in courses.

3. Special student counsellors should be hired to provide support, information and counselling to Native students, and also to act as a liaison between Native families and the school.

4. Special workshops on self-image and self-esteem should be offered students.

5. Cultural awareness training should be mandatory for teachers in University and should also be provided in the form of seminars and workshops.

6. School personnel should use their community resources for information on Native culture.

7. More Native school personnel are needed: teachers, teachers' aides, tutors.

8. Text and library books should accurately portray Native history, culture, issues, leaders, contributions to society, and relationships with non-Native society.

9. More Native people should be encouraged to participate on school committees, school boards and in parent-teacher associations.

10. Culturally fair psychological assessment tests should be developed.

11. Native children should be encouraged to share their culture and heritage.

12. More funding should be made available to reserve schools so that they can upgrade course materials and hire better teachers.

13. New approaches such as the Kipohtakaw Education Program should be investigated and if possible, expanded to other areas.

14. Special assistance should be made available to Native students with language difficulties.

15. Discrimination among school children should be openly dealt with. Teachers who discriminate should be required to take cultural awareness training. If this is unsuccessful, they should be removed from their positions.

16. In "boarding" schools, preparation should occur before students begin -- in particular, foster parents and natural parents should be given opportunity to exchange information and get to know each other.

17. Support groups should be set up for:

a) Native children attending "boarding" schools.

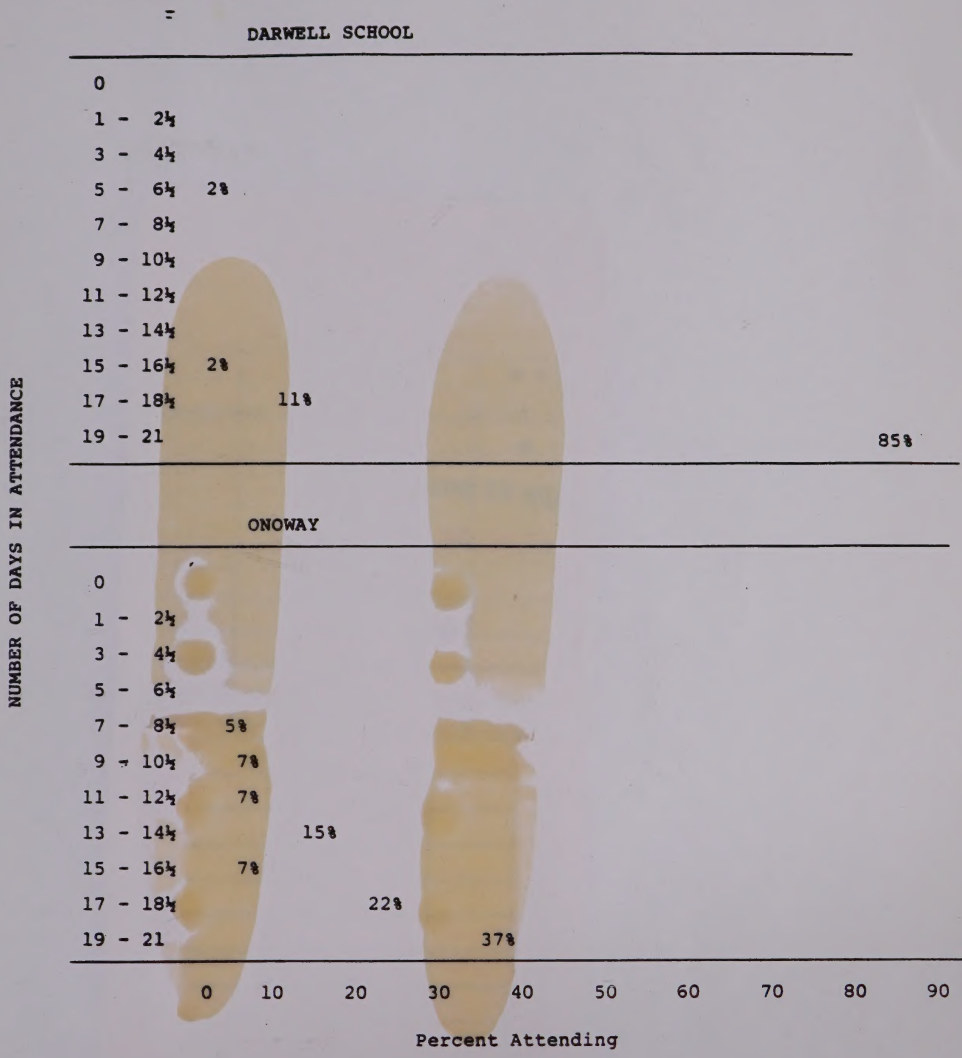
b) The foster parents of these children.

18. More funding should be made available for Native students to continue their education in specialized training courses or higher educational institutions.

APPENDIX A: NCSA's 1982-83 Annual Report containing information on:

- history
- philosophy
- services
- funding
- organization
- staffing

Comparison of Native Students Attendance Rates in Two Schools, September 1983 (in percent) *

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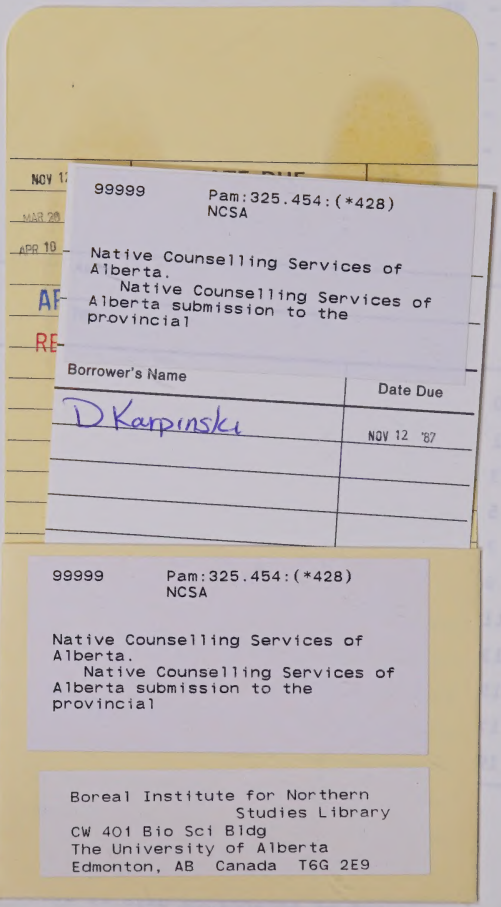

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